

LOCAL NEWS

Novato honors environmentalist for 50 years of service



Bill Long, a longtime environmentalist, pauses at a marker on the Bay Area Ridge Trail in Novato, Calif., on Wednesday, Feb. 5, 2025. Long has been named Novato's citizen of the year. (Sherry LaVars/Marin Independent Journal)



By **KRISSY WAITE** | kwaite@marinij.com

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Novato has recognized a longtime environmentalist as its 2024 "citizen of the year."

Bill Long has been a volunteer for the city and Marin County in various roles for more than 50 years. His work ranges from conserving natural spaces for public enjoyment to developing the Bay Area Ridge Trail.

Long, 87, was awarded the title at the city's birthday party at the end of January.

"I was very surprised," Long said. "I've known some of the previous citizens of the year and I never thought of myself as being particularly qualified because a lot of my interests and activities were outside of Novato."

At the county level, Long has served on the Planning Commission, the Parks and Open Space Commission, the Marin Open Space Trust board and the Zone 1 advisory board of the Marin County Flood Control District.

He has also served as a board member for the North Bay Water Reuse Authority, the Novato Sanitary District and the Bay Area Ridge Trail Council.

"Bill has been a dedicated volunteer and advocate for Novato for over 50 years, leading initiatives that have improved environmental sustainability, flood control and open space preservation," said Eric Lucan, the county supervisor representing Novato. "His contributions in Novato, Marin and the greater Bay Area benefit us all now and will be felt for years to come."

Long grew up in Rhode Island and is the son of a health care administrator and a bookkeeper. He got his bachelor's and master's degrees in chemical engineering from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

After living in Holland for six years for a job in the oil industry, he settled in Novato. He said he always loved the environment and saw a lot of possibilities in the area.

"I was just fascinated by the outdoors and all the opportunities to get out and enjoy them," Long said.

Long said that at the time, his children were young and they explored everywhere, sparking his interest in preservation planning. He was on the Marin County Planning Commission in the 1970s and worked on the 1972 ballot measure that created the county Parks and Open Space District.

"Just in my 55 years here, most of the open land right around Novato is now public land, and permanently protected," he said.

Long also advocated for water recycling and was foundational to the creation and success of the North Bay Water Reuse Authority, according to Jim O'Toole, the program manager. The program, which began in 2002, is a collaboration of 11 municipal agencies to recycle water, build capacity and increase the resiliency of the area's water supply.

"As a conservation-minded leader and collaborator, Bill embodies pragmatic optimism, always provides a space for others to stand and herds all towards a more resilient water future," O'Toole said.

Long said one of his best accomplishments has been the creation in 2008 of the Marin Open Space Trust, which works with municipalities to protect natural lands from development. He noted how the trust helped preserve a Pacheco Valle meadow, Bald Hill in Ross and, more recently, about 100 acres in Fairfax.

"Those have all been very satisfying because at the end of the day after you've done all the work, it's not just a stack of paper, it's a piece of property for the public to have and enjoy," Long said.

Perhaps one of Long's most recognized efforts has been his work on the Bay Area Ridge Trail Council. He has served on the board for more than 30 years, including about 15 as chair.

Janet McBride, executive director of the nonprofit organization, said that during Long's time on the board, the trail has grown from 165 miles to almost 415 miles, and is now open and protected.

"Bill is an environmental hero and collaborator," McBride said. "His hands-on leadership has benefited the environment and quality of life for all Bay Area residents, leaving a lasting legacy of open space, trails, parks, clean water, recycling and waste reduction for generations to come."

Novato Mayor Tim O'Connor said Long is a well-deserving recipient of the city honor who has served Novato, Marin and Bay Area communities for decades.

"Over that time, he has accomplished a truly remarkable range of achievements," O'Connor said. "It is challenging to just highlight one or two things from a lifetime of service, but one legacy defining project has to be his work with the bay trail. His dedication, vision and effort helped it to become a reality and it will be a wonderful community asset for many decades to come."

Long is working with U.S. Rep. Jared Huffman to get the trail designated as a National Scenic Trail.

"This year is going to be a big year in terms of new additions for the ridge trail, and I'm still working with the ridge trail to get it up and running," Long said. "It's probably enough to keep me out of trouble."



Bill Long of Novato walks along the Bay Area Ridge Trail in Novato, Calif., on Wednesday, Feb. 5, 2025. (Sherry LaVars/Marin Independent Journal)
